

1990

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Recommended Citation

Donaldson, Vicky (1990) "Paths: Or How I Became a Law Student," *William Mitchell Law Review*: Vol. 16: Iss. 5, Article 13.
Available at: <http://open.mitchellhamline.edu/wmlr/vol16/iss5/13>

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PATHS: OR HOW I BECAME A LAW STUDENT

VICKY DONALDSON†

I have been asked hundreds of times why I decided to go to law school. At one time I thought I had a clear answer, but periodically the waters muddy. My law professors would take credit for muddying the waters, i.e. teaching me to think like a lawyer. However, I know this muddying confusion is just a natural maturation; at least when you are going to law school, approaching forty, you're female, and you're a mom of two teenage daughters.

THE CHILD'S VIEW

My why I decided to go to law school story starts with a judge, my Grandpa Madsen. My Grandpa Madsen was the county judge of Washington County, Blair, Nebraska from the late 1940s (that's a few years before I was born) until the late 1960s (that's when I graduated from high school). So you can see that my understanding of my grandpa's job and his position in the community comes from a child's perspective.

My Grandpa was not a lawyer. He attended college for two years, worked in a bank for awhile, had a hatchery business, was a boy scout leader, had ten children (one of which was my mother), and was a Democrat. Although Nebraska is generally Republican country, this combination was a winning one for my Grandpa. He was elected county judge and never defeated before he retired.

I don't know the politics of why he was elected. Maybe it was a job no one else wanted. Maybe having ten children and being an authoritarian father helped. However, I'm quite sure my Grandma had a part in it. My Grandma was jolly and thought life was for the purpose of having fun. She dressed up like Charlie Weaver¹ and told jokes at any local occasion that would have her. She was a great vote getter.

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1. For those too young to remember, Charlie Weaver was a comedian during

I would meet my Grandpa at the court-house after school to get a ride home. I would be sure and go early enough so that Chris, the clerk of court, would have time to buy me a Coke. Chris' office was way upstairs, just off the district court room. I don't think I ever got to play in the district court room; it was too formal, like church. I did play in my Grandpa's court room, it was much smaller and less ominous than the district court room. I'd sit up in front in the big chair and pound the gavel. Then I'd try a different view and go sit in the audience section. When I'd tire of the court room, I'd go in the vault. There were huge, old, musty-smelling books. I don't know what was in all of them, but I know there were marriage records.

My Grandpa married people. He also handled traffic court, sent kids to reform school or foster homes, and settled estates. I think this last part, settling estates, involved him in arranging and conducting auctions. At least that's where I think the bright scarlet '59 Pontiac I drove to college came from. I guess no one else wanted to buy it, and my Grandpa thought it was just too good a deal to pass up.

Compared to what any of my other relatives did, being a judge seemed the most intriguing. My other grandparents owned a hatchery, and I wasn't that interested in chickens.² Besides, the chickens and the feed smelled funny. My dad drove to Omaha to work and I really didn't have any idea what he did. My mom didn't work as far as I knew. So a judge was it.

Not only was being a judge interesting, but I thought it made my Grandpa famous. Everyone knew who my Grandpa was, and they all called him "Judge" or "The Judge." It sounded important. Sometimes men would come to his office or his house and they would talk. They'd sit close together and talk with serious looks on their faces and you just knew that this was important.

Maybe I should be a judge when I grow up.

the 1960s. He was not quite a Hee-Haw type character, but along those lines. He was over weight and dressed sloppily in baggy pants, shirt, and an old hat.

2. The only thing that was interesting was watching the baby chicks being sexed. As you can imagine, its hard to determine the sex of a baby chick. A fellow from Omaha was the only person skilled in this way and he would come down and perform this ritual after every hatching season. You really had to be there to understand it or believe it.

THE ADOLESCENT VIEW

I was a bright high school student, but I always thought that I didn't work hard enough and didn't deserve the grades I was getting. I ended up graduating in the top ten percent of my class, with the honor cord, National Honor Society, DAR Good Citizen Award, and a teeny-weeny scholarship to Dana College. I decided to go to Dana, in my home town. I didn't think I could get a scholarship anywhere else, and I didn't think my parents had much money to send me anywhere. (But I don't remember ever really talking to them about this.) Besides, I didn't really know what I wanted to do, or be, or why I was going to college except that everyone else was, and I didn't have anything else to do.³

So I entered Dana College. At that time, becoming a judge was part of some childhood fantasy or silliness. It never occurred to me that I could or would continue school after I got my college degree. I liked music and loved to sing, but I didn't think I was good enough to be a music major. I liked to read, so English was a possibility. My favorite teacher in high school had been an English teacher, Mrs. Wright. She was closely followed by Mr. Barth; a gorgeous, fresh-out-of-college-who-drove-a-Camaro English teacher. So maybe an English teacher was a possibility.

I worked while I went to college. I can't remember whose idea that was. I don't know if I had to or if I was encouraged to so that my education would "have more value to me." I remember that one of my English professors, Herta Engleman, told me that she didn't understand why I was working. She'd seen my family and me at church and we didn't look poor, and she thought my working was interfering with my classes. I was insulted that she would make such a judgment about me based on how my family appeared to her at church. Self-righteous-

3. My parents did say, "you should go to college and get your degree now because if you don't go now you will probably not? might not? never? get another chance." I don't recall how strongly this was said. This seemed a little contradictory because my father got his bachelor's degree about the time I graduated from high school.

He had planned to be an engineer and had attended the University of Colorado for a semester or a year, I can't remember. Anyway, he missed my mom, his high school sweetheart so much, that they ran off and secretly got married over one of his breaks from school. As luck would have it, I entered the scene, and my father had to drop out of school and get a job at Kelly Ryan Manufacturing—A local farm implement manufacturer—This may explain the "now or never" advice.

ness aside, the bottom line was that I liked working more than I liked going to classes, at least I had some money to show for it.

I also fell in love at this time. Why would I be interested in going to classes when I was in the midst of such profound emotional experiences and crises? There were ballgames to be watched so I could admire the graceful moves of my beloved. There were hours to be filled just being in each other's presence.

I went to classes sporadically, but at least enough to graduate. What next? What will I do now? Guess I'll get married.

THE NOT QUITE ADULT VIEW

To say that I wasn't ready for marriage is one of those understated truisms. It was 1971 and some of my friends were already married. We were straddling the old and the new. Women's Lib. was spoken of and admired, but only the brave and strong were really living it; and I was not brave or strong. I had not been a good student, only mediocre. There was a teacher glut and English teachers were a dime a dozen. I would graduate soon and what would I do? I would get married.

And not only would I get married, but I would have a baby. Ready or not, you will be a mother. Some of my memories of the first years of my marriage are not happy. The inevitable realization that life was real, not the romance imagined by a naive girl from small-town Nebraska hit me sometime during that period. And I often thought it was unfair that my beautiful baby would have to be raised by parents that were still children themselves.

But gradually a plan developed. I would be the best mother I could be, and since I'm already having one baby, I would have another in a couple years. We'd get our quota of two in right away. I was young, I would postpone the decision that I had been postponing ever since high school, "what do you want to do with your life." After I had mothered sufficiently and my kids didn't need me around as much, I would start my career, whatever it would be.

This part of my life is difficult to explain to someone who hasn't lived it. Living with small children was all consuming for me. I could never fully concentrate on anything else. If I

was carrying on a conversation, I was only half there because I always needed to be aware of where my children were and if they needed me. Cleaning house was a never-ending treadmill of knowing that what I had just done would be undone and need doing again, and be repeated for everyday from now on until as far as I could imagine.

It was a time of great fulfillment and great frustration. The most fun I ever had was watching my children play; when I could observe them without them knowing, and listen to their made-up conversations, ideas, and plans; watch their concentration in what they were doing; and watch them learn before my eyes. But having to be cooped up inside with a couple of cranky kids that fought all day, cried and whined, and could or would not be made happy by anything I could do was the worst time I ever had. And there was just enough of each, the wonderful and the terrible, to keep me going, to not give up, to believe that this was worth doing after all.

I did work, but I chose jobs that would not require a commitment that might interfere with my mothering. I wanted to have all my strength and energy available for my children so that if they had a problem or a need, I could drop everything and help. Be there to fix everything; that's what I wanted, and that's what I tried to do.

I didn't do as good a job as I wanted to, but I probably didn't do as bad a job as I thought I did, either.

FINALLY, THE ADULT VIEW

The adult, grown-up me emerged, and is still emerging, gradually. I can't tell you when it started, but at some point I realized that my life was a gift. That everything that had gone into it up until that time; my past, my mistakes, my successes, my joys and my sadness, were all mixed up in this wonderful life formula. I wasn't some image or expectation, but I equaled the sum of all my experiences.

Sometime during this transition to adulthood, I decided to get in touch with my insides and try to figure out what I was telling me. For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to "be somebody," or "do something." My first childish idea of what that meant was to be a Broadway star or a wide receiver, and, oh yeah, there was that judge thing. What I chose had to be possible.

I have opinions on everything. I think my opinions are worth something and I think they're as valid as the opinions that count in this world. I remember my fourth grade teacher told a kid, in front of our whole class, that he was stupid because he didn't know his multiplication tables. I thought she was mean. I remember my seventh grade science teacher called one of the troublemakers in our class to the front of the room and punched the kid in the stomach for some reason that I didn't think warranted a punch in the stomach. Anyway, I said something and somehow ended up sitting in the wastebasket in front of the whole class. In tenth grade, Rusty Triplet and I decided that the centennial of the day Nebraska became a state was important enough to warrant a half day off from school, we bravely made an appointment to see the superintendent, and demanded the afternoon off. We didn't get it. In college, two of my friends were accused of mooning someone in the parking lot and were being railroaded out of our sorority for this indiscretion. I fought and argued for them at the meeting, but they were thrown out by what I thought were hypocritical, narrow-minded people. It ruined me on sororities. Later, when I was a mom, I joined a neighborhood organization to stop a street widening, served on the board of the Montessori preschool and got in a few philosophical scuffles there, joined a community council, attended numerous meetings and generally stuck my nose in where I thought it needed to be stuck.

These were some of the things that popped into my head when I was trying to decide what I should do with my life. There seemed to be a theme.

What about this judge thing? Law school?

Lucky for me the LSAT showed I had the aptitude for law. And if you talked to my parents, they would confirm that I always had a legalistic way of arguing my adolescent battles. I needed to be able to write, but this was no problem. After all, I was an English major, and even if I had not been a diligent college student, I had always taken my writing seriously.

So armed with my assessment of my interests and philosophy, my predictor of success, and my ability to write, I thought I should be able to manage law school when the time was right.

THE ESSAY

What does all this have to do with an essay, you may be ask-

ing by now? Or maybe you were asking after the first page. Think of it as allegory for all and education for some.

My story is part of this essay only so far as it represents my story. I have now come to a point where all legal professionals have been—a law school graduate looking to break in and find her place within the profession. I would like to think that everyone's path to this point has value for the profession. Other advanced degrees and high-powered appointments and positions are certainly admirable medals of an individual's achievement, but are they necessary to be a successful attorney or judge? Each individual's path must be valued, because, after all, it has led them to the same point.

Especially at William Mitchell. The diversity and entertainment value of each of our "how I became a law student" stories would outshine those at most schools. Most of us haven't taken the direct path, the straight path or the easy path. We had delays, detours, and dalliances, but we have all arrived at the same point now. And we've all arrived with a wealth of experiences to offer the legal profession . . . and some great stories, too.

